The Aboriginal voice in the left-leaning *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, 2008).

Abstract.

Arguing that Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) is a big-budget, non-independent film espousing a left-leaning political ideology in its non-racist representations of Aborigines on film, this paper suggests the addition of a 'fourth formation' to the 1984 Moore and Muecke model is warranted. According to their theorising, racist "first formation" films promote policies of assimilation whereas "second formation" films avoid overt political statements in favour of more acceptable multicultural liberalism. Moore and Muecke's seemingly ultimate "third formation films", however, blatantly foreground the director's leftist political dogma in a necessarily low budget, independent production. *Australia*, on the other hand, is an advance on the third formation because its feminised Aboriginal voice is safely backed by a colossal production budget and indicates a transformation in public perceptions of Aboriginal issues. Furthermore, this paper argues that the use of low-cost post-production techniques such as voice-over narration by racially appropriate individuals and the use of diegetic song in *Australia* work to ensure the positive reception of the left-leaning message regarding the Stolen Generations. With these devices Luhrmann effectively counters the claims of right-wing denialists such as Andrew Bolt and Keith Windschuttle.

Keywords.

Australian film; Representation of Aborigines in film; Catriona Moore; Stephen Muecke; Voice-over narration; Titling; Leftist politics; Baz Luhrmann; *Australia* (2008); Gerald Bostock; *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1983); Andrew Bolt; Keith Windschuttle.

Introduction.

In 1984 Australian academics Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke wrote of an at-that-time seemingly ultimate "third formation" (36) in film representations of Aboriginal Australians. These bold, politically-charged films were characterized by the non-racist "linking of Aboriginal groups and individuals with leftist *independent* film-making groups" (ibid, original emphasis),[i] and they unapologetically championed Aboriginal rights within a milieu of little to no financial investment, government backing or marketing. They were radically different to films situated in the "first formation" of Moore and Muecke's three-tiered model, which were characterized by appallingly racist and "paternalistic" (ibid), assimilation-oriented themes (e.g. *Jeddah* [Charles Chauvel, 1955] and *Man in the Middle* [BBC, 1967]) and they also contrasted notably with films of the "second formation" (ibid) which were, and still are, identifiable as promotions of more acceptable multicultural liberalism - perhaps epitomized most recently by the grittily realistic character studies of the Aboriginal, glue-sniffing fringe-dwellers in *Samson and Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009) or the residents of the Aboriginal women's refuge in *Here I Am* (Rebecca Cole, 2010). Significantly, in the post-production of Thornton's widely lauded fiction film, explicit political statements that might have quickly qualified it as third formation were avoided, apparently in deference to the director's naturalistic approach to the portrayal of quotidian Aboriginality. In contrast, a short speech on the misrepresentation of Aborigines in imprisonment statistics in Cole's film seems contrived and out of place in an otherwise apolitical narrative.

Whilst not suggesting for a moment that such second formation films as *Samson and Delilah* and *Here I Am* in any way impede Aboriginal rights activism and/or progress, I would like to propose in this paper that the "leftist *independent*" approach to films featuring Aborigines described by Moore and Muecke as the "third formation" due to their overtly communicated

political agendas and exemplified by low budget independent films such as *Lousy Little Sixpence* (Gerald Bostock, 1983), has now been superseded by a novel 'fourth formation'. Leftist (or at least left-leaning) pro-Aboriginal political rhetoric, it seems, can now be un-problematically appropriated - and possibly even furthered - by non-independent cinema, if the success of writer/director Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008), on which approximately $AUD150 million was spent, is any indication. Specifically, the left-leaning orientation of *Australia* works to counter the "authentic version of Australian denialism" (Manne, 2006) that claims the Stolen Generations[ii] to be a fiction, a claim so heinous it is described as "a revival of the original offence" (ibid).

Furthermore, I would like to propose in this paper that directorial manipulation of the Aboriginal voice works to ensure positive reception of the left-leaning message. As has been flagged - but theoretically undeveloped - by Moore and Muecke (with regard to the films *Man in the Middle* [BBC, 1967], *Sons of Namatjira* [Curtis Levy, 1975] and *Lousy Little Sixpence*), the film-maker's choice of the voice-over narrator's actual race has been instrumental in manipulating audience acceptance of either left or right-leaning Aboriginal policy since the 1950s. Hence, I will be arguing in this paper that in *Australia*, the decision to foreground a voice-over narration from the diegetic Aboriginal character Nullah (Brandon Walters) as compared, say, to a non-Aboriginal, documentary-styled, non-diegetic voice-over such as that employed in the first formation film *Man in the Middle*, typifies a directorial attempt to reinforce left-leaning sentiment and politics. This has previously been evidenced in many second rate films the world over, in which the director intervenes personally in the often frenetic activity of the post-production suites where manipulation of sound and titles is made possible at low cost. I suspect Luhrmann knew this for he effectively aligned his audience with the sweetly feminine Aboriginal protagonist of his gigantic melodrama through

voice-over narration and diegetic song, and I believe this was his auteurial ambition, much of which was exercised at the final stage of the film's production. But he would have felt quite comfortable with his risk-taking for his otherwise dicey undertaking in post-production was safely preceded by the employment of no-expense-spared cinematography, the utilisation of massive star power via expensive Hollywood casting and the co-operation with a colossal government-funded international advertising/marketing campaign. Such an orgy of spending is, of course, the antithesis of low budget, independent productions such as the second formation films *Samson and Delilah* and *Here I am* or the third formation film *Lousy Little Sixpence.*

Post-production manipulation of voice-over narration is the province of the afterhours editing desk and can be fashioned in the recording studio almost as cheaply as on-screen titles, which have been a much-used component of film-making since well before sound colonised the medium and only a few years after the white European colonised Australia. Both these post-production techniques represent fertile opportunities for an adventurous, politically motivated director to profoundly influence the audience's subjective and ideological response to their work on the big screen and I would suggest that those films that combine the two represent an extreme example of what Gerard Genette once called an "author's intrusions or interventions" (1980, 94).[iii] *Lousy Little Sixpence* and *Australia* both use voice-over narration and instructional titling - their directors' 'guilt' regarding authorial intrusion is equal - but in the early 1980s, an unheralded director such as Bostock with his leftist political leanings was confined to 'intruding' his authorial worldview upon his limited audiences via low-budget, independent film-making. A quarter of a century later and Luhrmann was able to successfully promote a similar ideology in what might be the most-Hollywood film to ever describe itself as Australian. Indeed, since box office returns in Australia for *Australia* are now second only

to *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), film scholars should not be surprised if more big budget, non-independent, leftist leaning Australian films are soon made with the influential feature of both Aboriginal voice-over narration and didactic titling: representing further examples of what Moore and Muecke might have called a 'fourth formation' in their model of the representation of Aborigines in film.

Australia's Left-leaning Narrating Voice.

For a long time, since the early days of Australian cinema, Aborigines had no realistic say or representation on the silver screen. Anne Brewster writes that for the original inhabitants, this nation's "history of terror" had "no site upon which it could enter the public domain and no means by which it could be heard in the dominant culture" (1995, 4-5). But a lot has happened in the 25 years that separate the documentary film *Lousy Little Sixpence* from the blockbuster fiction film *Australia*: Mabo, Aboriginal land rights and the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially saying sorry to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal Australians figure prominently. Yet these two chronologically disparate films both strive to address the history of terrorism by white Europeans against Aborigines. Each commences with a look-alike series of titles explaining the history of the Aboriginal Protection Board in the 1930s and 40s and its role in the Stolen Generations. In *Australia* this onscreen text is linked to an auteuristic sequence glorifying the BazMark crest and motto, redolent with the heady memory of Luhrmann's extravagant Red Curtain trilogy[iv] and signalling the highly creative nature of the director's uniquely fabulous, filmic fantasy about to unfold.

In stark contrast, the only other information provided by the titles that begin *Lousy Little Sixpence* is the statement "Narrated by Chicka Dixon". Charles "Chicka" Dixon (1928 – 2010) was a well-known and respected Aboriginal rights activist in the second half of the

twentieth century. Like a political endorsement that trumps all dissent, the import of this film's voice-over narrator's actual identity was not undermined by the subsequent addition of titles regarding lesser mortals such as the director, producer or even commercial stakeholders, if there were any: as the Chicka Dixon acknowledgement text fades, the documentary's first interview subject's face instantly fills the screen with no identification of, let alone Luhrmann-like auteurial fanfare for, director Gerald Bostock. *Lousy Little Sixpence* is thus a truly independent film. Such stylistic disparity between these two films cannot, however, disguise the fact they have make similarly political statements. The Stolen Generations is still a political issue more than a quarter of a century after Bostock first thought it cinematically worthy.

Perhaps this longevity in cinematic interest in the topic is because the activities of the Aboriginal Protection Board remain contested ground for some historians and commentators. Unbelievable as it is to many intelligent citizens of Australia, there are strident deniers of the very existence of the Stolen Generations who somehow manage to receive positive media exposure for their right-wing theorising. These Stolen Generations deniers include prominent newspaper journalist Andrew Bolt (who insisted that not one stolen Aboriginal child has been identified [2004] and then that no more than ten were [2008]) and historian Keith Windschuttle (who denies there was any racial motivation behind the few that were [2009, vii]). Robert Manne writes, "The most extreme exponent of this branch of denialism is the *Herald Sun*'s Andrew Bolt" (2006) and the frequency with which his opinions are published indicate that a sizeable degree of support for his right wing views exists in the community. But to the stunned Australian citizenry who said sorry and genuinely seek reconciliation, I assure all that for Stolen Generation deniers such as Bolt and Windschuttle, *Australia* must be a painful and unbearably biased film, even if they watch it with the vision blacked out. This

pair's considerably disagreeable cognitive dissonance would result because the film's soundtrack features Aboriginal voice-over narration from the very first scene, providing an initially disembodied sonicity that surrounds the audience, gently bathing the receiver in its subjectivity but then forcefully and irresistibly directing us all to the narrator's singular point of view, that is, Nullah's point of view.

Voice-over narration is a cinematic device of such "insidious power [... to induce] ideological 'false consciousness' [and] illusory promotions of subjective consciousness", according to Avrom Fleishman (1992, 195), that he estimates up to "one in six sound films is narrated" (191), although few of these will deviate significantly from the audience's aural expectations, especially in the mainstream film-making industry. In the independent industry, however, adventurous auteur's experiments range from a self-doubting voice-over narrator's interior dialogue in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) to unreliable, multiple voice-over narrators in *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003). Compared to these, Luhrmann's approach is relatively straightforward and transparent: by making Nullah the voice-over narrator, the director makes it clear from the start that this film is first and foremost the little Aboriginal boy's true story and, by doing so, he instantly discourages any potential audience dissent with his ideological stance of non-racism. The young Aboriginal voice-over narrator convinces the audience effortlessly[v] that he is the protagonist of the story: an authentic survivor of the Stolen Generations threat. The boy's narration trumps the chest-thumping of Stolen Generations deniers and we, the audience, are metaphorically rendered deaf to their right wing rhetoric.

Consider the significance of Luhrmann's unlikely choice of Nullah as narrator over the white-skinned, non-Aboriginal lead characters of *Australia*, Lady Ashley (Hollywood A-

Lister Nicole Kidman) or The Drover (rising Hollywood superstar Hugh Jackman), given the advice academic Linda Aronson writes for aspiring scriptwriters: “Make sure that the character speaking in voiceover is meant to be the protagonist, because the audience will assume that it is; indeed, any character speaking in voice-over will take over the film” (2000, 63). Like authoritative, omnipotent gods, voice-over narrators cannot easily be questioned even by doubtful audiences. The point of view presented in *Australia* is indubitably that of Nullah and much of the audience is subjectively aligned with him and his plight within seconds of the film’s beginning, whether they like it or not. Through the aural ambience of the Aboriginal Australian’s gentle voice-over atmospherically framing the film, Luhrmann imbues him, one of the Stolen Generations, with innocence, authenticity and, eventually, agency. In the film’s denouement, the combined effect of voice-over narration and diegetic song brooks no argument with Stolen Generation deniers, despite the relative unlikeliness of such a non-hyper masculine protagonist/narrator: a pre-pubescent child. We, the audience, believe in Nullah’s predicament and earnestly desire him to evade the police, to be re-united with Lady Ashley and The Drover, and to learn from his Grandfather of his Aboriginal culture and his birthright. His achieving his goal of tribal initiation - what Moore and Muecke would have called “self-determinism” (36) in third formation films - represents *Australia*’s satisfying plot resolution. He is the embodiment of reconciliation, able to successfully integrate into the ultra-white family of Lady Ashley as well as meet his tribal obligations.

Now, perhaps I should clarify why it is that I describe Nullah as an unlikely protagonist/narrator. In so-called classical, mainstream cinema, especially in the golden studio days of Hollywood, the stock-standard choice for narrator of *Australia* would have been the hyper masculine Drover with his brusque, commanding tone, controlling personality and hard, throbbing muscularity. Think of the film noirs narrated by no-nonsense, hard-boiled

private eyes or the westerns introduced by crotchety but wise old-man ranchers, as is parodied by the Sam Shepherd delivered voice-over in *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998). Then there's the plethora of wildlife documentaries narrated by men with a professorial timbre in their voices: most have the unseen, deep-registered and polished masculine tones typical of patriarchal, mainstream, middle-class, right-leaning America, unless they are the honeyed tones of Briton David Attenborough. Of course, there are many exceptions to this generalisation, but I believe there has been an overwhelming tendency in Hollywood film-making to cast mature males as voice-over narrators in what Fleischman estimates are the one in six productions that employ this device.

Why is the preference for masculinity in voice-over narration important? With regard to filmic representations of Aborigines and rightwing, racist attitudes, Moore and Muecke write: "the camera may have failed to represent the people as an oppressed group. And if sub-standard living conditions are shown, the soundtrack may simply fail to give a satisfactory account of this" (39). An example of this failure by the narrator to recognise a group's oppression, according to Moore and Muecke, is the soundtrack of the first formation film *Man in the Middle*, in which "racism is evident in terms of lowered expectations for the Aboriginal subject" (41). This film's right-leaning commentary is delivered in condescending voice-over by an unseen but obviously white male, who, marvelling at the film's Aboriginal subject Charles Perkins' 'successful normality', opines in his clipped baritone voice that "To his kinsmen, the course of his life is as miraculous as a tribal myth" (ibid). Rightwing racism made acceptable by the voice-over of white male authority, it seems, in distant 1967.

But Luhrmann has chosen a sweetly feminine voice to narrate his story instead of that of an imposing male authority figure. Moreover, Nullah's vocal femininity is visually reinforced by

his long, blonde-streaked hair, slight build and epicene features. Indeed, several fans have posted in online forums that they originally thought him so beautiful they believed he was actually a girl.[vi] His pre-pubescent voice unbroken, Germaine Greer assumes that Luhrmann directed him to speak a "cutesified stage version of pidgin" (2008), further emasculating his character. In fact, I suspect the director was deliberately looking for a feminised foil to the hyper masculinity of the other characters in his film, especially those right wing-leaning men who would incarcerate Nullah on Mission Island. With Lady Ashley's complex character essentially a buffoon (at least at the start of the film) and hence inappropriate as a reliable narrator, the choice of the feminised Walters was an inspired casting decision. Of course, Luhrmann could have presented Nullah unattractively - yet realistically as per *Samson and Delilah* - with flies swarming about his eyes and snotty nose, delivering lines of unintelligible but authentic Aboriginal speech known colloquially as 'Station English', and even have extended his use of sub-titles to the boy's voice-over, but I believe he reached a believable and cinematically successful compromise: a mode of speaking that sits acceptably between Lady Ashley's upper class Queen's English and The Drover's working class, vernacularly red-necked communication.[vii]

Of course, the good guys in *Australia* are all impossibly cute or handsome while the bad guys are ugly, boorish boozers and dastardly cruel. So melodramatic is the scriptwriting that they all come across as two dimensional caricatures rather than complex personalities with depth. The Drover, with his back-story of losing his Aboriginal wife to racism in Australian hospitals, is the most complex character in the film, yet Luhrmann cannot resist exploiting the actor's impressive physique for comedic effect in at least one scene, when he adopts a bodybuilding pose as he washes by the campfire. But I believe it is this excessive caricaturisation that Luhrmann was aiming for, and not just with the Aboriginal characters.

Dean Ashenden agrees, “Most of his Aborigines are cartoon-like characters (David Gulpilil, camping it up as King George, just about winks at the audience), but then so are most of his whitefellas” (2008). Ashenden might well agree with my argument that both visually and sonically *Australia*’s characters are deliberately cartoonish, cheesy and clichéd, as this furthers the broad and at times preposterous comedy and what Marcia Langton calls the “fabulous hyperbolic” (2008a) stylistics of the film. Despite the seriousness of the Japanese invasion scenes, the overall ambience of the film is that of light-hearted fun, further opening up possibilities for high levels of audiences’ subjective alignment with wide smiling Aboriginal protagonists such as Nullah. With regard to the film’s status as a possible fourth formation in film representations, one cannot help but note the function humour serves in *Australia*: it precludes the possibility that Luhrmann’s very serious, guilt-laden, leftist message is not read by audiences as heavy-handed didacticism, which is an off-putting characteristic of *Lousy Little Sixpence*.

Certainly this is where many critics such as Bolt fail to fully understand the full ramifications of Luhrmann’s auteurial project in this “camp as a row of tents” (Archer, 2010) movie: much of *Australia* is a comedic send-up of Antipodean tropes, albeit an at times subtle one due to its many in-jokes written specifically for Australians. Despite referring to its clichés sixteen times in his 2008 article, Bolt nevertheless fails to grasp its humour. Bolt aside, perhaps only natives of the Great Southern Land will laugh at the ridiculous depictions of the country’s best-known national symbol, the kangaroo. One of the film’s first sight gags shows the Aborigines on top The Drover’s truck shooting a roo just after Lady Sarah has rapturously applauded its beautiful jumping, reminding savvy viewers that roo meat is a very low fat protein source highly valued by the First Australians and a far more ecologically sustainable food source than the cloven hoofed, greenhouse gas producing cattle and sheep still herded

by the white Second Australians. Other incongruous scenes featuring the marsupial half of the Australian coat of arms include joeys being cuddled like toys by foul-mouthed red-necked children[viii] or lurking around campsites apparently waiting for opportunities to sniff The Drover's discarded "Poorfella" rum bottles.

Even some of the most tragic scenes in *Australia* are amusing, especially to scholars of Australian film who can detect their postmodern, inter-textual references: for example, the self-sacrificial death of Magarri (David Ngoombujarra) mischievously recalls that of Archie (Mark Lee) in *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981). Perhaps some non-Australian film reviewers, not familiar with Antipodean history and the Aussie penchant for laughing at themselves, have unwittingly expected a serious epic about the building of a nation, although pre-release publicity comparing *Australia* with *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Out of Africa* (Sidney Pollack, 1985) certainly contributed to this erroneous expectation. Likewise, any expectations of *Australia* to serve as a factual docudrama are also erroneous, for as Pam Cook notes regarding Luhrmann's films generally, the facts simply provide a "basis for a reinterpretation and dramatization of the past that collapses time and place, creating a consciously artificial world through a collage of different styles" (2010, 22).

Couched in all the comedy, caricature and artifice of *Australia*, however, is the serious left-leaning issue of the Stolen Generations, a crime perpetuated in this film not by the usual well-meaning, maternal nuns but by menacing, duplicitous, male officialdom, and foregrounded by the device of making Nullah the non-hyper masculine protagonist/narrator and potential victim. This is a significant feature of Luhrmann's cinematic vision when the prevalence of the male gaze of much of Hollywood's cinema is considered and then extrapolated to audio. The male gaze, Laura Mulvey argued, is the dominant, yet ambient, position constructed by

patriarchal Hollywood for the audience (1975, 6-18), in contrast to less common non-mainstream or independent cinema, in which females (or other non-masculine identities) are sometimes the dominant agents of narrativity. Their probably unconsciously constructed and typically unconsciously received subservience is emblematic of standard, mainstream cinema: it is the Hollywood ideology we rarely even notice, unless we are educated in feminist film criticism. Only a few feminist film theorists, however, have been inspired to examine the way voice may actually unconsciously reinforce the male gaze. Maggie Humm acknowledged this deficiency, stating that "feminists rarely trace the ways in which women in mainstream films often lack independent vocal energies as well as independent images" (1997, 40).

The case for an auditory correlate of the ubiquitous, unconscious male gaze of Hollywood, however, has yet to be convincingly argued. Robert Ryder suggests that in Walter Benjamin's 1938 work on the optical unconscious there lurks a latent theory of the 'acoustical unconscious':

> Just as Benjamin's acoustical déjà vu involves an echo stepping into the light of consciousness out from the darkness of a life seemingly passed by, the 'other' nature of the camera involves a similar process whereby a space interwoven with the unconscious 'steps into' a space interwoven with consciousness (2007, 135-55).

Emboldened by this speculation, I would propose that there is an unconsciously operating aural mechanism permitting greater identification with Hollywood's typically hyper-male agents of narrative who, although insensitive and aggressively macho, are valorized by the Hollywood apparatus that privileges their masculine voices as innately superior.[ix]

Kaja Silverman's comments support this thesis: the woman's "obligatory receptivity to the male gaze is what establishes its superiority, just as her obedience to the male voice is what 'proves' its power" (1988, 32). Thus, I believe an unconsciously operating, effectively controlling male voice cooperates with the controlling male gaze of mainstream Hollywood cinema. In those relatively rare films in which a feminine or non-hyper-masculine character assumes the role of narrative agent, as in *Australia*, the audience's construction of subjectivity is therefore neither automatic nor accustomed. Rather, the audience must be coaxed to identify with the improbable and unlikely subject. Luhrmann's bold decision to make Nullah the voice-over narrator strengthens the boy's position as the film's protagonist whilst simultaneously negating the hyper masculinity of the (predominantly macho adult male) perpetrators of the Stolen Generations crime in the film, who might have narrated the film under another auteur's direction. In making Nullah the voice-over narrator, Luhrmann makes a sweeping and daring statement that the Aboriginal Australian is more important in this country's history, one could say, than James Cook, Lachlan Macquarie or Bob Menzies. More important than Arthur Streeton, Sydney Nolan or Patrick White. More important than Donald Bradman, David Campese or Greg Norman. For unlike these supremely successful white men, Nullah is the exemplary Oz innocent. Given Sarah Kozloff's assertion that voice-over narration "couches a film as a conscious, deliberate communication" (1998, 139), it is quite obvious to me that Luhrmann was calculatingly striving to amplify the Aboriginal Australian voice and point of view in his film, as he subverts and nullifies the hyper-masculine male voice of those who would attempt to breed out or otherwise eradicate the Aboriginal Australian through the racist policies that permitted the Stolen Generations atrocities, and which egregiously characterized the first formation films.

***Australia*'s Left-leaning Singing Voice.**

The next aspect of voice and the Aboriginal Australian in *Australia* I want to address is that of diegetic song and how Luhrmann uses it to further the significance and veracity of Nullah's Stolen Generations left-leaning story. Much is made of Nullah's magical powers which he summons through singing: in fact, the occurrences are essential plot devices that drive the narrative arc. Jo Dyer writes of the significance of singing in traditional Aboriginal culture:

> With Aboriginal song, as the music permeates, one gets a sense of timelessness, of connectedness, of a collective spirituality encompassing both humanity and nature - a powerful religiosity that incorporates humanity into nature [… a] key means of communicating and experiencing spirituality (2009).

But in *Australia* we hear an exaggeratedly cute version of Australian Aboriginality: Nullah's singing voice is no typically rhythmic, low-pitched drone. Rather it is high-pitched, feminine and sweetly ethereal, as the boy asserts "I'm gonna make the land sing" and his saccharine singing works some impressive magic. Supernaturally, Nullah's tune stops a herd of stampeding cattle in its tracks and, later, is the very engine of Lady Ashley's successful quest to find him.

This notion of effortlessly conjured supernatural powers is, again, I suspect, not meant to be taken seriously. Yet some critics still do. Brian McCoy writes, "It tempts a romanticism of Aboriginal spirituality and ceremony" (2009). More perceptively, however, Richard Phillips writes, "*Australia* makes numerous references to the "singing ceremonies" of Aboriginal people. But instead of trying to portray the complexities of these ceremonies, Luhrmann depicts them as a kind of easily accessible 'Harry Potter'-style magic that works wonders in difficult situations" (2008). Although not Aboriginal himself, there can be little doubt that

Luhrmann knew he was diverging from outback reality when he portrayed this mystically fanciful version of Aboriginal spirituality. As with the "cutesified" casting, the sung mysticism of Australian Aborigines in this film is deliberately cartoonish as Luhrmann, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, manufactures his own fabulous yet respectful take on Aboriginality. Ultimately, however, it all serves to invest the Stolen Generations narrator with more credibility and power, despite his non-hyper masculinity.

Now, let's consider Luhrmann's positioning of the Aboriginal Australian voice in the context of that most un-Australian of songs, 'Over the Rainbow', with regard to the Rainbow Serpent of the Aboriginal Dreaming spirituality. The relationship is explicitly referred to by the dialogue: when Lady Ashley reluctantly tries to cheer up the recently-orphaned Nullah with a rendition of the song, the grieving boy immediately exclaims: "Rainbow Serpent!" and instantly, the Hollywood song is connected to the narrator's Aboriginal eco-spiritual philosophies. When Lady Ashley concludes with the line "Dreams really do come true," he reflects: "Dreaming song … Missus Boss, we gotta get those no-good cheeky bulls into the big bloody metal ship […] That's what Dreaming songs tell us, Missus Boss!" Hollywood's most famous movie song erects yet another cinematic pillar supporting Nullah's point of view. And thus begins the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming song-driven quest to drove the cattle to Darwin, in which the motley crew of drovers further the analogy of sung magic by serenading the cattle at night. When this act of the film is completed, the song is again brought into the film's diegesis when Nullah dons blackface so he can watch *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) without being detected as a creamie,[x] or half-caste, an unfortunately ideal target for the Northern Territory government sanctioned forced assimilation into white society.

Indeed, the choice of this particular song has multiple significances. The movie from which it comes seems an obvious reference point for a film about magic men in the country known as Oz. Furthermore, the mentor for Nullah's magical talents, his grandfather King George, is described by Nullah as "… a wizard. He gonna sing for us." In *Australia's* finale, after King George spears villain Neil Fletcher (David Wenham), Lady Ashley says "Let's go home," to which The Drover replies, in an echo of *The Wizard of Oz's* famous last line, "There's no place like it." Later, King George, on finally taking Nullah walkabout with him, states to Lady Ashley, "You have been on a journey, now we are heading home … to my country … to our country." Most tellingly, however, the extravagant magical qualities of both the film's characters and plot are manufactured and narrated by an innocent, feminine and naïve adolescent. Like Dorothy (Judy Garland), Nullah is telling a story with important allegorical meaning: there's no place like home and generations of Aboriginal kids should never have been stolen from theirs.

Finally, the contrivance that sees the film reach its happy ending is entirely dependent on the director's use of the Aboriginal voice. Nullah plays the melody of 'Over the Rainbow' on the harmonica left to him by Kipling Flynn (Jack Thompson) and thirty seconds later, the other 'creamies' sing perfect harmony in what sounds like an Aboriginal language version of the hymn 'Ave Maria', prompted by the Mission Island priest, Brother Frank (Matthew Whittet)[xi]. Lady Ashley hears the music floating around her, its aural ambience arriving ahead of any sighting of her Nullah. As the film's romantic climax approaches, non-diegetic strings and orchestra join in stirringly until Nullah finally locates his beloved 'Missus Boss', whom he had forlornly believed dead. With overbrimming joy, he tells her "I can say your name," reflecting the Aboriginal protocol of not speaking the name of the deceased and the import of oral history to the Aboriginal people, although this is really only a passing example

of the significance of the Aboriginal Australian voice in this film. Nevertheless, Nullah's temporary vocal impotence is annulled with the re-discovery of Lady Ashley. He continues, "Missus Boss, I sing you to me like the first night I see you," as he then reveals to her that The Drover is still alive. Moments later the disparate trio are re-uniting in a soul-affirming group hug. Like a *Deus ex machine*, the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming song effectively connects them and the narrative arc of the film is complete: the non-hyper-masculine protagonist and voice-over narrator is saved from being a victim of the Stolen Generations.

Conclusion.

If a comprehensive survey of representations of Aborigines in film produced since 1984 were conducted, I suspect the majority of the films surveyed would be described as second formation, in that they promote multicultural liberalism: *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002) and *Bran Nue Dae* (Rachel Perkins, 2009) immediately spring to mind. In these films, statements of political leaning are not featured as overtly as they are in so-called third formation films, such as *Lousy Little Sixpence* and, as I have argued, *Australia*. Aboriginal Australian Chicka Dixon pugnaciously ended his politically charged voice-over narration from 1983 with the unsubtle statement: "We were the first Australians and this is our land," whereas the subtle combination of non-diegetic voice-over from the character Nullah and diegetic performances of the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming song combine effortlessly and work sub-consciously to convince audiences of the truth of the Stolen Generations argument, despite the fundamentally fictional diegesis of *Australia*. The reactionary politics of this big budget Hollywood film exemplifies an approach considerably more leftist than many of its mainstream filmic predecessors, especially Moore and Muecke's first formation films of the 50s and early 60s, although this trend was perhaps signalled by

the much smaller budget left-leaning films *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Philip Noyce, 2002) and *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005). Yet like the shoestring budgeted documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence*, Luhrmann's monumentally expensive film is book-ended with low-cost textual titles onscreen, didactically outlining a left-leaning manifesto, as archival footage and the end-titles are used to explain the significance of the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations. These directorial nods to documentary stylistics function to appropriate the non-fiction genre's sense of veracity and serve to seal the audience's sense that the comedic, fantastically fictional *Australia* is nevertheless politically correct.

However, while the two films both rely on the authenticity of their Aboriginal voice-over narrators, *Lousy Little Sixpence* is decidedly independent whereas *Australia* personalizes its leftist leanings in a big-budget, uplifting, romantic comedy that exploits the most endearing elements of Hollywood's clichéd melodramas, going so far as to appropriate the ethos and song of one of Hollywood's most loved films, *The Wizard of Oz*. No expense is spared in presenting the gender-stricken binary between the half-caste, pre-pubescent creamies and the bristling white male bureaucrats, such that the leftist femininity of Nullah predictably wins out over the right wing, controlling, hyper-masculinity of those who would keep him away from his culture. Fully embodying reconciliation, he successfully integrates with the white family of Lady Ashley whilst still going walkabout with his grandfather to thence take on the next stage of his Aboriginal Australian life: initiation from androgynous child into Aboriginal Australian manhood. Like children everywhere, and like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Nullah represents a more positive future.

All this left-leaning rhetoric, whilst frequently tempered with humour, is constantly reinforced aurally in *Australia*, thanks to the Aboriginal character Nullah's voice-over and the Dreaming song. This sub-conscious manipulation is effective to the extent that nobody in the audience 'hears' the shrill rightwing protests of Stolen Generations deniers such as Andrew Bolt or Keith Windschuttle. In summary, Luhrmann brings to the history of representations of Aborigines in Australian film a new level of non-racism and his non-independent, big budget, Hollywood-styled, Aboriginal Australian film warrants the addition of a 'fourth formation' to Moore and Muecke's 1984 model. Of course, this new category highlights a major flaw in their model, and that is that it is imbued with a short-sighted sense of finality. The reality is that representations of Australian Aborigines in film are constantly evolving. What were considered reactionary pro-Aboriginal politics in the early 80s have transformed into a far less contentious issue, but this current moment may only be temporary. Who knows, there may be some right-wing film-makers out there presently drafting scripts for big-budget assimilation-themed films, perhaps financially backed by racists such as Bolt and Windschuttle, in what would be a 'fifth formation' of film representations of Aborigines.

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[i]Where, a reasonable reader might assume "independent" means the film was a low-budget, non-mainstream production and "leftist" implies its politics were overtly anti-racist, egalitarian, pro-environment and/or pro-feminism.

[ii] The term 'Stolen Generations' refers to Aboriginal children removed from their parents as part of an official government policy from the late 1890s until as recently as 1970, according to Knightly, 2000, 113.

[iii]Other examples of authorial intervention via post-production sound include the director's insertion of a laugh track into a comedic film, a level neither Bostock nor Luhrmann stoop to.

[iv] Baz Luhrmann's so-called Red Curtain trilogy consists of *Strictly Ballroom* (1996), *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (2000) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2004).

[v] I must concede that short of screening a version of *Australia* with a mature, authoritative male voice-over narrator to a test audience, I can only assume the ease with which viewers are seduced by Walter's voice.

[vi] For example: “he is the most beautiful boy, i actually thought he was a girl. his character is more powerful than other stars inthe movie. well done Brandon [sic]” (Alexis, 2009).

[vii] Canny casting or instinctive talent, Brandon Walter’s screen debut was universally lauded for his beauty and charm and he was awarded the 2008 Outstanding New Talent at the Satellite Awards and the Best Supporting Actor at the 2009 Film Circle of Australia Awards.

[viii] Orphaned kangaroo joeys have a very low survival rate, even when cared for by professional wildlife rescuers.

[ix] Unfortunately, proving the unconscious power of the masculine voice-over is outside the scope of this particular study.

[x] It should be noted that the term “creamie” was likely invented for the film. A more commonly used label was “yella fella” as indicated in Birch, 2003.

[xi] Brother Frank’s complicity in the theft of the children, one should note, is diminished by his femininity: it takes The Drover to reluctantly employ his fist-work on his behalf to help Brother Frank overcome the swaggeringly masculine character Bull (Eddie Baroo) who is in cahoots with the forces that would see Nullah stolen away. Although he is undoubtedly one of the good guys, The Drover’s overt masculinity also needs some explication here: he differs considerably from Fletcher, Bull *et al* in that he is not a braggart nor is he portrayed as excessively macho, rather he is simply efficient. He is certainly neither sexist nor racist. Most telling, however, is his undesired ability to fight, as the first set piece of the film clearly demonstrates. Brawling, for The Drover, is a last resort, and only an insult about his late

Aboriginal wife can bring him to reluctantly raise his fists to end the relentless goading by racist, sexist, rightwing boors such as the macho Bull.